

A WHITE ROOM IN A GOTHIC MANOR. SPACES OF THE HEROINE IN *ADELHEID* BY VLADIMÍR KÖRNER

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To say that the actions of literary characters are played out in a certain cultural-historical space seems trivial. However, there are many novels in which the spatial construction of the fictional world becomes particularly meaningful. Descriptions of space start to be significant, and the space itself ceases to be a mere background to the protagonists' actions, and it begins to affect them, to tell its own story. It is no different in the case of *Adelheid* (1967), a novel written by the Czech writer Vladimír Körner. The rules of the spatial construction in the world that Körner shows us are disturbed, which leads to the disappearance of the familiar distinction between the public and private. This is due to the situation in which the characters are placed: the world described in *Adelheid* shows the post-war situation in Czechoslovakia just before the organised expulsions of German-speaking inhabitants of the country, the end of the 700-year-long coexistence of Czechs and Germans.

In this text, I analyse one of the most significant places that are described in the novel. It is a room of the daughter of the previous owners, located in the manor where the main character arrives to become a new administrator of the estate. The problem of the post-war re-settlement of the Borderlands and the way in which the issue is conceptualised and described is highlighted by comparing *Adelheid* and the most famous Czech novel concerning the same period, a socialist realist work by Václav Řezáč entitled *Nástup* (1951). Such a comparison is justified because even the names of the towns where the action takes place in both novels are interrelated: Grünbach (*Nástup*) and Schwarzbach (*Adelheid*). While the protagonists of Řezáč's novel look at a new world full of possibilities, those from *Adelheid* are far from such enthusiasm. In Řezáč's work the name suggests a green area, and, therefore, flowering, spring, the beginning of new life – which is, of course, brought with the new Czech settlers. Therefore, it is not surprising that Řezáč's characters from time to time contemplate the beauty of the resettled village. Meanwhile Viktor, the main character of *Adelheid*, arrives in Schwarzbach, an unfriendly place, connoting darkness, decline and fear. Moreover, it is seen as such by the hero himself. The novel by Řezáč was written shortly

after the war, at the time of “post-war euphoria of the end of the war and liberation” as well as “attempts to fulfil the theses of socialist realism” (Tomáš 77). Körner, writing *Adelheid* in 1967, already had a large enough distance to the war itself as well as to the “liberation.”

The use of the novel *Nástup*, and not some other books of the epoch, as a counterpoint for *Adelheid* can also be justified in another way. The work by Řezáč embodies the essence of the socialist realist way of writing about the borderland: “*Nástup* is its peak partly because most works written after *Nástup* only try to problematize the theme ..., but also because *Nástup* represents a motivic and thematic synthesis of previous works” (Tomáš 78). Körner must, therefore, be aware that his narrative steps into a world already so suggestively outlined by Řezáč in the minds of readers. Consequently, the narrator in *Adelheid* speaks to us not only from a different cognitive and ideological point of view, but it also uses other tools.

Viktor Chotovický, the main protagonist of *Adelheid*, arrives at Schwarzbach with a precisely defined purpose. He has to look after a German estate, namely the manor of Alfréd Heidenmann, one of the prominent local Nazi officials. The house, which Körner frequently refers to as a “little castle” (Czech *zámeček*), is located outside the village. Amazingly, this makes it similar to a transit camp for Germans, which is also placed somewhere outside Schwarzbach. Thus, the standpoints of Viktor and the former inhabitants waiting to be expelled are similar, as they are social outcasts who remain on the margins of society. The impression is intensified by the fact that Viktor, although he is Czech, has just come back from the West. He spent the war in England, in the auxiliary service of the RAF. In his homeland, now under a communist regime, he is, therefore, not welcome and he seems suspicious.

Viktor is looking for peace and quiet. However, the mere sight of Heidenmann’s estate gives the impression that peace will be hard to achieve there – unless we mean the eternal peace. The manor or, as Körner wants it, the “little castle,” a property of a German awaiting trial in Olomouc, is a grim building in the pseudo-historicist style, which, at first – but only at first glance may look appealing. Viktor, coming from the fields, can see:

At the end of the alley ... the house and the greenish sheet metal of the copper tower The manor at the end of the alley was quiet and the last beam of sunlight was reflected in the windows, as if light was already turned on inside. A sandy path forked next to a neglected rose-bed and joined again at the sandstone stairs where a mattress and some gilded frames lay scattered around. (Körner 23)

The pseudo-light in the windows suggests the will-o'-the-wisp, leading wanderers astray, as well as the lights in the windows which a hero of fairy tales notices, while wandering through the woods. Like them, the lights in the windows of the manor disappear when Viktor comes closer. A neglected flower-bed and the visible signs of looting can be regarded as a symbolic representation of what is left of German culture in the region. To quote the Russian literary scholar Vladimir Toporov: "the abandonment of space, the disappearance of its constant elements ... arouses trepidation in the human soul" (47). The manor itself, without its inhabitants, who disappeared from there, can cause such feelings in the hero. Gradually approaching the building, Viktor sees all the elements of horror in Heidenmann's house:

Mature plane trees put the front of the house in deep shade, on plastered wooden rails strained and blushed the wild vine, sharp crosses of the Knights of Malta were silhouetted against both towers, and ... the gaping mouths and heads of gargoyles: the little devils and lizards. (Körner 23)

The manor is, therefore, equipped with all the elements vital to Gothic horror fiction. The house, pictured as in the nineteenth-century Gothic novel, not without coincidence, raises similar associations in one of Viktor's guests: "You live here nicely Perfect Middle Ages" (Körner 76). The Gothicism of the manor is also highlighted by the first book leafed through by Viktor – lying open on the lectern, there are poems by Walter von der Vogelweide. Also the inside of the house bears the hallmarks of the Gothic. The view that greets Viktor after he enters is "a suit of knightly armor scattered on the floor like a shadow of a sleeping or dead man" (Körner 23). The first association with the scattered knightly armour which Viktor has is of a sleeping or dead man. However, there can be another interpretation of this view, which is the result of the actions of the looters. The abandoned weapons and armour can create the illusion of a sleeping knight. His role was to defend the house when the worst danger came. However, he could not wake up on time, leaving only sad remains, no longer needed by anybody: even to the looters they did not seem valuable.

But this is not the only knight on the estate. Heidenmann's house is full of signs of its former glory, also glory of arms. In the garden there is "a statue of St. George ... a dimmed, bronze lizard ... covered in mud" (Körner 53). Similarly to a scattered suit of armour, Saint George stands in the corner of the garden muddy and abandoned, as if the chivalrous ethos "appropriated" by the previous owners left this world for good. The last knight in the house is a portrait of a crusader, hanging in the living room on the ground floor of the building. What especially frightens Viktor is a cage, located in the garden of the estate. On the basis of the dried blood stains, whips and leather straps

which he finds inside it, he concludes that this is where Heidenmann used to keep foxes or disobedient hunting dogs (Körner 31). He is, however, informed that he is wrong: "That's what a medieval pillory looked like, it's a copy. Old Heidenmann sometimes locked in here some Polish prisoners. He had them working in the forest. He comfortably let them go without food for two days and one got beaten by him just at the stairs" (Körner 35). It brings associations with Gothic images of slavery in American literature, as described by Ellen J. Goldner. This kind of discourse does not have to be rational and based on facts, as Goldner argues. Instead, it has to show the distortion of the lens through which we look at certain social phenomena (Goldner 60). This is not the last clue which tells us to think about the meaning of Gothic stylization used by Körner in *Adelheid*.

A cage, as I try to prove further, is a recurring theme in the novel. An uncanny concatenation of German love of the Middle Ages, the romantic surroundings of the manor, and, at the same time, the cruelty attested by the cage, is a combination typical of stories about the Nazis. The greater problem arises when the title heroine of the novel, Adelheid, appears. She is sent there as a maid, but she turns out to be the daughter of old Heidenmann. She does not speak Czech, Viktor does not speak German. They communicate in a kind of sign language; actually until the end of the novel they do not have an opportunity for a normal conversation. As the narrator shows us the events from the perspective of Viktor, we can trace the way the protagonist tries to understand Adelheid and her story by exploring the surrounding area: the Gothic mansion, and later also Adelheid's room from her childhood years.

This process of the transition from open to smaller, closed places, as in this case from Heidenmann's manor as a whole to a small room in its distant part, is similar to the process described by Toporov. The Russian scholar treats the closing of space around the characters as an analogy of transition from a wide and open living space to the narrow and confined space of death (Toporov 43). Viktor's feelings could, therefore, be connected to the death that fills the property of the convicted German – through the dried blood in the cage, through the spirit of past Nazi glory, and through the fate of the characters of *Adelheid*. Here, too, the fact that Körner stylizes the space of the whole manor as that of a Gothic mansion has its meaning. As Paul Lewis writes, "it escaped the attention of many readers and critics that, for all its tawdriness, the Gothic novel by presenting mysteries raises and often answers important questions about man, society, and the universe" (207). He is right when he points out that the often ridiculed setting of Gothic novels is not just a tool of building horror, but it can fulfil other functions. How, then, can it be interpreted in Körner's novel?

Lewis notes that the authors of Gothic novels often used the genre to ask the question about the nature of evil. I think that Gothicism in *Adelheid* has a similar function. This stylization is, to a certain extent, a story of cruelty which rules in this fictional world. What is Gothic here shows its simplest face and one that is easiest to discern. Through the stylization, Körner distances himself from the demonization of German culture – he himself, through the images described here, demonizes it up to the limit of absurdity – present before in the earlier-mentioned *Nástup*, as well as in other works from the epoch, and he draws attention to the space in which cruelty can easily pass unrecognised: an apparently innocent “white room” of Adelheid. The bottom line lies in the realm of human relationships which are full of incomprehension and the obstacles to dialogue, based on suspicion, prejudice and false preconceptions.

In this context, the “white room,” discovered relatively late by Viktor, proves to be an important space in Heidenmann’s house; equally important are the objects therein. For, as Toporov writes, “things not only constitute space by determining its borders and separating space from non-space, but they also organize it structurally, giving it gravity and importance (semantic management of space)” (30). There are things in the “white room” – which turns out to be the former room of Adelheid – that will provide Viktor with the clues as to how to understand the past of the woman. They will also make the definite sense of this past.

At the beginning, Viktor notes that Adelheid has not visited the room since she was sent to the mansion as a maid, because everything is covered with dust, despite the protective covers on the furniture. Viktor names the room “white” because this colour dominates over others in terms of the decoration and interior design. Soon he discovers that the room once belonged to Adelheid, who from the owner of the house turned into a servant. The dominant piece of furniture in the room seems to be the piano, but it is silent – as noted by the hero: “every touch of the fingers remained noticeable in the dust, he could write down on the lid” (Körner 40). The fact that it is Viktor who gives the name to the room puts him in a special position: naming something makes him the discoverer, someone who makes a place his own. In this way the “white room” starts to belong more to him than to Adelheid. When we interpret the space in this way, it reveals other meanings.

Viktor’s attention is drawn by a singing picture hanging on the wall, whose mechanism still works. It plays one of the songs by Haydn – a quite frivolous, yet depressing song of a young man proposing a love-meeting to a girl. As noted by Viktor, the tones of the mechanism and the song itself do not fit in with the elegant room of a lady from the mansion, but the picture would rather hang in a rural cottage room (Körner 40). The image of Adelheid is

becoming more and more ambiguous; it is also worth noting the words of the song. Körner quotes only a fragment of it, and it is difficult to understand that the song is actually addressed to a nun, and not just to the girl whom the boy wishes to meet. Can the “white room” play the same role as the monastery walls, be a kind of cage? Eventually, the picture sings to Viktor: “Halten Klostermauern dich nochso streng gebunden” (“The monastery walls keep you closed so strictly”). It is said in the novel that Adelheid took the picture as the only possession from her old house when the family moved into the manor. May it suggest that somehow she identified with the nun to whom the song was addressed? And later, was she not a prisoner of the “white room” which, in addition to the necessary objects for a young lady from a good family (a dusty piano), contains also the things connected with National Socialism? Viktor finds in the room a paperweight with the words “Alles für Deutschland” and Heidenmann family photos demonstrating their relation with the regime.

The hero – before his look is directed to the girl’s desk, with its paperweight and framed photograph – also finds a family album. There are two very different pictures of the Heidenmanns in it. The first must have been taken in the 1920s: Adelheid is still a girl, her brother is held by the parents. The fact that the family is still nothing more than one of many average German families of the First Czechoslovak Republic is visible in the setting of the photo. The Heidenmanns are sitting on a birch bench, behind them is a garden and a large Silesian house (Körner 41). The last photograph in the album, the same which stands on the desk in the frame, presents the same, yet now a completely different family:

old Heidenmann looks firmly into the camera, the passing years have made him bolder and more straight, next to him a slightly older woman in a wheelchair for the seriously ill has bent her head; beside his father stands a young man in uniform and, in harmony with them, a young woman in the shirt and scarf of the League of German Girls. (Körner 41)

As can be seen, it is not simply that time has passed between one photograph and the other, but also a certain epoch. While the first photo depicted the Heidenmanns as one of many German families in Czech Silesia, the second is already a portrait of Nazi supporters, with a son in the Wehrmacht and a daughter in the League of German Girls. In this way from a nice family picture we pass on to the photo which is proof of sympathy with the Nazi regime. The photo is dated 12th October 1939. Six years after the photograph was taken, nothing is left of the arrogance of old Heidenmann and the Wagnerian glory of his family. In the ashes of the former glory there stands a

stranger – what is more, a Slav – holding in his hand the memorabilia of a proud family.

Because of the symbolism of the white colour, the “white room” should supposedly be a witness of the girlish innocence of Adelheid. However, the things stored in it make this space more ambiguous. It could also be a prison from which Adelheid never managed to escape, because the past has caught up with her even when she is a humiliated representative of those who lost the war. In this room, we can see the traces of a bygone era of Nazi rule: a paperweight and a photo on the desk. Neither is there an escape for the heroine from the duties imposed by the *zeitgeist*. At the same time, Viktor’s search in the room can be seen as an attempt to exorcise the evil elements of this space, as noted by Toporov (68). This exorcism as yet seems to be unsuccessful.

But how to interpret the fact that the space is presented through Viktor’s eyes, and not Adelheid’s? Does Körner draw our attention to the fact that we know as little about the heroine as Viktor does?; assuming that she is beyond simple imagination – and, thus, it also cannot be put into propaganda stereotypes of Czech Germans? How can we connect Heidenmann’s house as a Gothic manor, as Viktor sees it, and the “white room” of Adelheid placed in the middle of it? Since it is named “white” by Viktor, it should be located at the opposite, symbolic end.

To conclude, the fact that we get to know the “white room” through Viktor’s eyes makes us doubt, as he doubts, the accuracy of his interpretation. Viktor is unable to know Adelheid, because he does not know how to talk to her. As a result, he interprets her behaviour, searching for answers in the artefacts of her past, closed in the “white room.” This seemingly innocent – “white” room turns out to be a collection of the contradictory histories preserved in the things it contains, and it is the evidence of such a confused interpretation. The “white” room stands in contrast to the dark Gothic mansion, as silent Adelheid stands in opposition – at least in the initial idealistic conception of Viktor – to Heidenmann, considered to be a criminal. However, this innocence originated in Viktor’s imagination, and on closer inspection it turns out to be more ambivalent. At the same time, the search performed by Viktor in the “white room” is another sign of an invasion of Adelheid’s privacy: she is deprived of the rights to the house, and later she is also exposed by so thorough a search of her old room. The heroine becomes a foreign intruder in her own home. She becomes almost a ghost, because she loses any impact on the spaces in which she is enclosed. If we consider the Gothic trappings present in the novel, Adelheid may appear to be a “white lady,” a ghost imprisoned in her former place of residence, of whose previous life only traces remain. The place where these traces are particularly

accumulated is the “white room,” which for Viktor becomes another enigma concerning Adelheid. An examination of this room, based on the understanding only of what is visual and non-linguistic, does not allow Viktor to decide whether Adelheid is an innocent victim of history or a co-participant of the events. The interpretation of the meaning of the things stored in the room leads Viktor only to a deeper fascination with the character of Adelheid.

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